

## 28. Ethnography – the costs of success?

*Convenors:*

**Marit Melhuus**, University of Oslo

[marit.melhuus@sai.uio.no](mailto:marit.melhuus@sai.uio.no)

**Jon P Mitchell**, University of Sussex

[J.P.Mitchell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:J.P.Mitchell@sussex.ac.uk)

The term ‘ethnography’ has achieved considerable currency across the social and human sciences. This workshop focuses on ethnography as a method and seeks to examine the consequences of this ‘exportation’ of ethnography to other disciplines – the costs of its success.

On the one hand it seeks to explore “where we’re at” in methodological terms. How has ethnography developed as a practice within anthropology? It is received wisdom that the older mode of village or community study has become outmoded as anthropology seeks to engage with new ethnographic objects. Where does this leave the ethnographic method? What kinds of new orthodoxies are emerging in ethnographic practice? What is distinctive about an anthropological – as opposed to sociological, ethnological, geographical or cultural studies – approach?

On the other hand, it seeks to examine the ways ‘ethnography’ is done in disciplines other than anthropology. A range of research practices across the disciplines are being described as ethnography – from classroom ethnographies to various forms of life history research, focus groups and unstructured interviews. Are they recognisably the same activity? Is there something distinctive about a specifically ethnographic approach, or has ‘ethnography’ simply become a new synonym for ‘qualitative research’? Have other disciplines stolen anthropology’s thunder – using the terminology of ethnography to describe other kinds of practices?

Finally, the workshop asks whether anthropologists need to find a new way of describing what it is they do that they call ethnography. Do we need to find a new language of methodology?

The inflation of ethnographic methods: A critical account

**Eduardo P. Archetti**, University of Oslo

[eduardo.archetti@sai.uio.no](mailto:eduardo.archetti@sai.uio.no)

Anthropologists have been reluctant to codify methodology. We ‘knew’ the ethnographic approach implied direct social contact with actors, immersion in the life of communities, long-term observation and monographic writing. We also ‘knew’ when an ethnographic account was good: rich data – symbolic forms, social patterns, discourses and practices, clear contextualization, well located lived experiences, theoretically informed, and, if possible, recording the way actors and communities were part of more encompassing social processes. Historically, Chicago school sociologists were doing more or less the same in modern cities but they did not label it ‘ethnography’. Thus for a long period of time ‘ethnography’ was the sole property of anthropologists. Anthropology’s prestige was consolidated in the 1980s when the fascination of ‘ethnographic accounts’ reached disciplines like history, literary critics, philosophy and cultural studies. Ethnography was declared an ‘emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon’ (Clifford 1986). My paper will critically examine a series of text-books of ethnographic methods published in the 1990s, and the way the journal *Ethnography*, started in July 2000, was able to transform methodology into a

subject defined by the academic world. I will try to reflect on the need to find a new manner of describing what we do when carrying out 'ethnographic research'.

The importance of time - between ethnography by appointment and deep hanging out  
**Inger Sjørslev**, University of Copenhagen

[inger.sjoerslev@anthro.ku.dk](mailto:inger.sjoerslev@anthro.ku.dk)

The success of ethnography means that many more people do it, or call what they do ethnography. The exclusiveness of ethnographic fieldwork is lost. Sometimes it seems so lost that even the professional ethnographers don't do it. Then, what do professional ethnographers do, and how can anthropology articulate its specificity in a world of ethnographic success? The paper will deal with these questions through some reflections on the role of time in ethnography. This has been an issue since the Malinowskian paradigm of participant observation established two years of dwelling among the objects of study as the proper duration of field work. Later generations have characterized field work methods as deep hanging out, and today much field work is done by appointment with informants who are as busy as the anthropologist, or busier. Time will be dealt with both concerning its role in the process of acquiring ethnographic material and in the subsequent analytical process. The experiential basis for this will be field work on rituals, which also leads to some reflections on the analytical value of boredom.

Anthropological encounters: describing the past

**Elizabeth Tonkin**, Queen's University Belfast

[elizabeth.tonkin1@btinternet.com](mailto:elizabeth.tonkin1@btinternet.com)

'Ethnography' connotes 'description', which can imply that no analyst has mediated findings - an echo of positivist science. Yet the term has been appropriated by many disciplinary rivals of anthropology including anti-positivist sociologists and many cultural studies scholars, none seemingly aware of its early primitivising and exclusionary meanings.

We should scrutinize our own ethnographic practices too. What did participant observation in early 'village studies' entail? What are the theoretical and practical implications of our different methods? I focus here on some aspects of anthropological encounters. Do these entail 'being there'? I argue that anthropologists cannot avoid using memory, imagination and emotion whether in first-hand experience or writing-up.

I consider historical accounts, increasingly attempted by anthropologists; some historians also use anthropological perspectives. Can we write accounts that are anthropological as well as historical and without 'being there'? I suggest such work can and should be justified in theoretical terms, but to do so requires a more nuanced and theorised understanding of ethnography.

Current Ethnography: Cases in Lithuania

**Vida Savoniakaite**, Lithuania Institute of History

[svida@ktl.mii.lt](mailto:svida@ktl.mii.lt)

One of the current debates among Lithuanian anthropologists and ethnologists is the place and methods of ethnographic practices for "qualitative research". Perhaps this question is an actuality among all anthropology researchers in Baltic States. How do anthropological and ethnological approaches differ? How are they related to current ethnographic practices?

Structured interviews of fieldwork are still the common method for the traditional ethnological village and community study. Different generations and traditions in Lithuanian ethnology and anthropology take different point of view on the perspectives of applying this ethnographic method combined with statistical questionnaires as a successful mean for studying actual social and cultural issues. Unstructured interviews and observation by participating become popular present forms of doing ethnographical research for anthropologists. On the other hand, there are similarities between ethnological and anthropological approaches in cases where they both use life history research and structured interviews as steps in their research. Furthermore, "ethnography" becomes more pluralistic by practicing different forms of dialog as well as observation that also use other social and cultural sciences. The paper will focus on the differences and similarities between anthropological and ethnological discourses of "ethnography" in Lithuania.

Ethnography: method or technology?

**Jeanette Edwards**, University of Manchester

[Jeanette.Edwards@man.ac.uk](mailto:Jeanette.Edwards@man.ac.uk)

The panel seeks to illuminate the way in which ethnography 'as a method' has been 'exported' to different disciplines. Also of interest is the way in which anthropology imports (the concept of) research methods. How useful is it to think of ethnography as a method? Even while carrying out interviews, scrutinising documents, or conducting surveys, and even when not 'in the field' in any traditional, long-term, residential sense, anthropologists can insist they are 'doing ethnography'. So what are they doing? I draw on the example of an EU funded project where the anthropologists concerned count as their informants 'publics' of various kinds: patients, clinicians, activists, legislators, families, farmers, gardeners and so on. They collect data through residential or non-residential fieldwork and through interviews and conversations in homes, clinics, gardens, offices, churches, bars and so on. They spend hours on the internet, in meetings, at public events and with documents (historical and contemporary). They are deploying 'research methods' which other disciplines might consider their preserve.

Bringing ethnography home? Some benefits of having ethnography venture into neighbouring disciplines

**Thomas Widlok**, University of Heidelberg and Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen

[Thomas.Widlok@urz.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:Thomas.Widlok@urz.uni-heidelberg.de)

When we see ethnography leaving the confines of our discipline we may look at it as parents do when they see their grown-up child leaving home, getting under the influence of other people without planning to ever completely return to its native family. But instead of trying to restore the original state of affairs this paper suggests that we may in fact benefit from the experiences that ethnography has gained by venturing outside anthropology. My particular concern is with linguistics where the term "ethnography" has been adopted some decades ago but where it has only recently been taken seriously in its theoretical implications as a means for investigating communicative practice. Central to this recent shift is a reconceptualization of the distinction between form and application and I suggest that

following this shift also reinvigorates the relevance of ethnography in anthropology. Just as speakers are no longer thought to be applying given linguistic forms, it is also problematic to speak of social actors as “acting out” their social or cultural roles in changing contexts. Ethnography is the prime tool for replacing the seemingly unlimited *potentiality* of speaking/acting across contexts with the practical *feasibility* for agents being positioned in specific social relations.

An Ethnography of Associations? – Transethnic research in the Cross River region

**Ute Rösenthaler**, University of Frankfurt/Main

[Roeschenthaler@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:Roeschenthaler@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

Ethnography has experienced a reorientation in the focus of its study. Since the past decades its focus increasingly shifted towards the mobility of people, ideas, and institutions among other things. This paper is based on a research project that I carried out in the Cross River region of Southwest Cameroon and Southeast Nigeria. Its aim was to reconstruct the specific histories of associations (women's and men's societies, dance associations and cult agencies) and to understand the driving force of their dissemination in a greater number of places to which the institutions had spread. This process opened the view for a landscape of associations that emerged from the synthesis of their individual biographies. The comparison of the data revealed great local differences between the various communities which were crucial for drawing general conclusions and were a clear advantage of mobile research. The project used a variety of techniques and sources for obtaining information and experimented with other approaches (historiography, biography) to understand the emergence of a landscape of associations in the Cross River region. It explores the intentions of the owners of the associations motivating the process of dissemination but does not make the people the unit of study.

Getting the ethnography ‘right’: On female circumcision in exile

**Aud Talle**, University of Oslo

[aud.talle@sai.uio.no](mailto:aud.talle@sai.uio.no)

In anthropological practice ‘ethnography’ refers to both a field research method and to a way of writing. A ‘good’ ethnography has a high standing within the discipline. This paper discusses methodological challenges in studying a local ‘harmful’ practice such as female circumcision in exile, in this particular case in London, where I have done sporadic field visits in recent years. In the 1980s I did research on female circumcision in Somalia, but when the civil war broke out in early 1991, this engagement was terminated. The fact that many Somalis, among others my research collaborators, became displaced refugees spurred further research on the topic. In an application for funds to conduct research in London, I found myself arguing that I needed an extended period of fieldwork in order to get the ethnography ‘right’. This paper discusses the question of a ‘right’ ethnography: what does that mean in relationship to this particular study object and to fieldwork tradition in anthropology? The argument of the paper rests on an underlying comparison between two empirical cases, female circumcision in Somalia and in London respectively. The reterritorialisation of local practices in global settings forcefully speaks to disciplinary issues of fieldwork, context and comparison.

