

Plenary Session III

Younger Scholar's Forum

When Communication Comes to an End...

Convenors:

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Since the times of Malinowski, anthropologists have assumed that the quality of ethnographic evidence depends on the quality of interaction and communication with our interlocutors, i.e. the building of relationships over time, language proficiency, as well as sustained engagement with people in their daily lives.

This panel wants to scrutinize this taken-for-granted assumption by looking at the “discomfort of proximity“. By this notion we refer to the many fields/times in which ethnographers may feel the need to distance themselves from those they seek to understand, such as in research among those who hold radical beliefs with which they profoundly disagree, or in situations of violent conflict. The panel asks researchers to reflect on what can be learnt from the radical disjunctures that often appear between ethnographers and their interlocutors during fieldwork. Recent work on mimetic ways of knowing has discussed how hunters and shamans avoid total identification while seeking to approximate another way of being. Participant observation as a method also entails the drawing together of proximity and distance. How do such ways of knowing help ethnographers to approach beliefs and practices from which they simultaneously wish to keep their distance?

Possible topics to be addressed include:

- Contexts in which the truth claims of the interlocutors are in conflict with the ethnographer's experience;
- Contexts in which the ethnographer resists close relationships and feelings of empathy.
- Contexts in which the ethnographer deploys the interconnection of proximity and distance as suggested by other mimetic ways of knowing.

Anthropology and Ocularcentrism

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The present crisis concerning ocularcentrism in anthropology has brought the question of vision to the forefront of the debate. Fabian (1983) has criticised the discipline's visualist bias, arguing that anthropology's stress on observation leads the fieldworker to adopt an objectifying and dehumanising stance towards the subjects studied, not unlike the naturalist watching an experiment. Other anthropologists, such as Stoller (1997) and Okely (1994),

have sought to escape anthropology's ocularcentric paradigm by developing sensuous perspectives towards ethnographic understanding. While I do not reject the ethnographer's need to use the full range of the human senses as sources of knowledge, I shall nevertheless argue that vision ought to have a privileged status within anthropology as a fieldwork-based enterprise. This has to do with the fact that vision operates in a distinctive way that is essential to ethnographic practice. In vision, distance and vicinity are not mutually exclusive but rather imply one another. That is, we can only see something when our gaze grasps it from the right distance. With regard to all the other senses, there is contiguity between subject and object, if not an internalisation and incorporation of the object by the subject. The tactile, for example, keeps the toucher in direct contact with the object touched; taste further implicates the subject, for the object must be ingested, internalised in order for it to be accessible to taste. Vision, however, performs a distancing function in that the optimal distance is also the optimal vicinity. This dynamic of detachment and proximity, of being Self and being Other, is fundamental to the anthropological project, which involves not only the need to internalise an Other's viewpoint, but also the equally important skill of avoiding the loss of one's sense of Self in the process. In fact, I will go as far as to argue that it is through the privileged status of vision as a source of knowledge that anthropology derives its authority as a social science.

Dirt, Disgust and Desire: Creating Distance on the Doorstep

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Acknowledging that the value of persons and things is mutually specified in the process of exchange, this paper argues that an adequate theory of value must also account for emotional transformation, without which evaluation of worth is impossible. In Bermondsey, for example, a place in Southeast London where the families and descendants of ex-Dockers and food-processing factory workers imagine community in terms of residence and kinship criteria, feelings of disgust are often expressed about the increasing presence of black people on Bermondsey's estates. Disgust is the justification for taboo, which makes being a Bermondsey person synonymous with 'not mixing with blacks'; it sustains the idea that black people are synonymous with dirty polluting qualities and is the basis of an idealised refusal to enter into exchange relations of any kind with black people. Where house-proud women once cleaned the neighbourhood into existence via a system of turn-taking exchanges for cleaning of communal areas, the housing estates are now run down and neglected as the basis of community belonging is undermined by the failure to integrate women from immigrant families. Meanwhile, kin relations in those few remaining real Bermondsey households, continue to be constituted in specific kinds of exchanges that are inseparable from transforming

feelings of desire. For the anthropologist, trying to understand what makes a people collectively distinctive, learning how to belong by trying to participate effectively in specific exchanges, there will be incremental and dramatic shifts both in the way she feels about her informants and in the way they feel about her. In situations of racial tension and violent confrontation, like in Bermondsey, for example, the assumption is challenged that as she becomes increasingly incorporated into everyday relations between people, the anthropologist moves on from feelings of profound alienation towards increasing identification with and empathy for her informants. Is it possible for her not to betray the distance that her increasing proximity creates?

Doing Fieldwork

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Doing fieldwork among illegal non-Jewish migrants from Latin America in Israel would have always been a delicate task for an (Israeli) anthropologist. Even more so when the state, in its relentless effort to deport illegal migrants, widely employs undercover agents and snitchers to track down their residential addresses and working places. In this atmosphere, when migrants go even deeper underground, sharing and trusting an anthropologist with basic information like one's address, let alone survival strategies, network building, and so on, can be a very risky act. And for what? Why should migrants co-operate with the completion of a research project that was design by an ambitious researcher on her/his road to an academic title? Under such circumstances, the management of fieldwork clearly requires: a) A subtle and lengthy process of confidence building that is based on close proximity with interlocutors and at times even intimate relationships; and b) A clear give-and-take relationship, where the anthropologist has something to offer and cannot simply stick to an 'objective' observer position. How do we then create distance when our interlocutors could interpret it with suspicion? How is it possible to develop the necessary give-and-take relationship without an axiomatic empathy to interlocutors? And does it then mean that, by definition, this kind of research is biased? What do we do when information given to us by interlocutors contradicts data from other sources, and moreover, when it contradicts interlocutors' own previous self-presentation and judgments?

Atheist Anthropologists. Believers and Non-believers in Anthropological Fieldwork

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"Are all you anthropologists atheists?" This question was put to me by a Pentecostal leader within an improvised discussion on "faith" and "truth", as we stood outside the door of the Igreja

Filadélfia (Philadelphia Church), waiting for the beginning of the daily religious cult. Following a reflection triggered by this somewhat unexpected question, this paper will then try to discuss issues of faith, belief, and personal convictions within anthropological fieldwork and namely within research in contexts of belief and religious practice.

Incorporating fieldwork and biographical accounts, I will discuss the involvement of personal beliefs and attitudes in anthropological theory and practice, and its consequences on the production and circulation of scientific knowledge and “public” knowledge, and also on the construction of personal relationships and social interaction.

Therefore, I will suggest three different points of future discussion: 1) anthropological fieldwork is a part of a multilateral and continuous development of ideology, morality, discourse, and practice within social life, where 2) the anthropologist is no longer the one and sole authority on the object of his study, and is also himself an object of study, not to mention the fact that 3) he is also, after all, a person with needs, beliefs, and routines.