

Review of: "Is Fieldwork losing its grace? Encountering Western and Indian Experience"

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Is Fieldwork losing its grace? Encountering Western and Indian Experience

Dipak Kumar Midya

Rather than wondering if fieldwork is "loosing its grace" I would think that the article discusses inherent dilemmas that are embedded in fieldwork and in the anthropological research. Some of them are phrased clearly:

- Should the anthropologist immerse him/herself (totally) within the society that s/he studies (according to Powdermaker, 1966) or rather strive to construct models? From my point of view the fieldworker becomes part of the field and the social context that he studies, whether he likes it or not. This means that he can participate, intervene, try to influence etc. just like anyone else in the studied field. I have realized this understanding in my PhD fieldwork in an absorption center for Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. This "total immersion" provided me with profound understanding of the power relations in this social framework.
- For how long should fieldwork be carried out to be considered as "in its true sense"? The author argues that conducting field work for "several months to a few years" seems to be impossible in the days of "tremendously fast life and with rarely available funding". Yet, the example he offers for his failure to immerse in the tribal people he studied, being unable to drink "handia", due to its strong smell, cannot be explained by the short time of his brief field assignment. My experience in studying a development project for women in Nepal which was based on some 5 weeks of working in that region provided me with rich data and revealed some exciting and unexpected insights.
- Do we have appropriate tools to test the verifiability of the case studies? The data are not absolutely unquestionable. It is indeed very important that anthropologists will do their best to ensure verifiability of their case studies. However, if we shall not trust our colleagues commitment (as we trust ourselves) to provide true and reliable data how shall we do fieldwork? Thus, personal commitment to professional ethics should be our basic guideline.
- Is maintaining ethical principles in anthropological fieldwork is practicable? Should we mention the name of the community in our reports and publications? Are anthropologists obliged to conceal names of informants in order to protect them? In my fieldworks I came to the understanding that most people are interested in publishing their names. I think that this contributes to the acknowledgment of their information and narratives. Moreover, it is almost impossible to conceal the details of a research field. However, in cases of potentially damaging people's interests and positions their privacy should be observed.
- Unbiased position of fieldworker: Is it possible to take a neutral standpoint? Should and can the fieldworker be totally

immersed in the field? Can he intervene as one of the society's member? I suggest that Dipak Kumar Midya should openly admit that he perceives immersion of the fieldworker as essential. This tendency of his emerges from relating to Srivastava (1999), who perceives empathy as "an important element of anthropological research that is built upon the relationship between the observed and the observer"; to Giddens (1996) who contends that anthropology "must be ready to contest an unjust system of domination and to bring potentially controversial issues to light and to Hart (1990) who argues that anthropology is for making a better, more democratic world for everyone, and for achieving that anthropologists should be 'politically' and 'morally' engaged with social problems".

Dipak Kumar Midya appears to be concerned about the fact that "... fieldwork in the West as well as in many Indian universities appears to be a diluted exercise". And also: "There is a lack of serious fieldwork in anthropology in recent times". Nevertheless I think that the fact that there are various approaches to fieldwork and increasing perspectives with regard to how and what is a valuable fieldwork, how long a fieldwork should take to be considered as serious and worthwhile, which ethical requirements should be adopted, are all important and thought provoking dilemmas.

Dipak Kumar Midya is also concerned with the fact that "...nowadays the discipline has been overburdened with too much specialization" which "fragmented the discipline" However, I suggest that fragmentation and specialization have contributed significantly to the ongoing development of the discipline.

Dipak Kumar Midya's concern that "the practice of fieldwork with fading importance has already led to the microscopic presence of anthropologists in policy-framing enterprises in India as well as in western countries". I don't think that anthropology should be concerned with its impact on "policy-framing enterprises" or with "solving contemporary problems". Fieldwork can have impact in the long run, but aiming at such influence may be related to institutional connections and commitments.

Hence, I suggest that Dipak Kumar Midya reconsiders his concerns about the fading grace of fieldwork. I contend that current fieldwork is dynamic, it develops constantly, its methods and approaches expand and it gains a growing acknowledgment (at least in Israel).