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Towards a Native Anthropology

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FIELD METHODOLOGY is currently a much-discussed subject in anthropology.¹ As usually conceived, research is a task carried out by an "outsider" or "stranger" who enters a society and attempts to learn about the way of life of its people. Thus, most discussions center on problems encountered by the outsider. But there is another vantage point from which research can be conducted—that of "insider," the person who conducts research on the cultural, racial, or ethnic group of which he himself is a member. The goal of this paper is to explore some of the problems of field work faced by such inside researchers.

The paper does not, however, focus entirely on the subject of field methodology; the epistemological dimension of field research will also be explored. I will attempt to show that the insider and the outsider do face different problems in the field situation. But as far as theory is concerned, there is as yet no set of theoretical conclusions generated from the point of view of native anthropologists. By a "native anthropology," I mean a set of

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theories based on non-Western precepts and assumptions in the same sense that modern anthropology is based on and has supported Western beliefs and values; for, as Maquet has pointed out:

... it seems clear that the existence of a particular discipline dedicated exclusively to the study of non-Western cultures reflected the Victorian sense of superiority of the 19th century Europe and was perfectly consistent with, and useful to, the colonial expansion of that period. Is it not striking that this situation persisted in Africa as long as did the Colonial system and had to wait the decolonization process to be questioned?²

So long as the use of native anthropologists does not lead to the development of a native anthropology, I disagree with the statement that "the science of anthropology has been greatly enriched by those informants who were influenced by anthropologists to become anthropologists."³ This is a process not yet achieved; its occurrence will benefit anthropology as a whole and may well prevent the "death" of anthropology predicted by some current writers.⁴

Field research is of course a process of finding answers to certain questions, or solutions to certain theoretical or practical problems. As such, it involves a series of steps from a definition of the problem to be studied through the collection of data to the analysis of data and the writing up of the results. The general philosophy in anthropology is that a graduate student should do field research for his Ph.D. dissertation. Furthermore, it is thought that his research should take place in a culture other than his own. Students are generally taught that a person working among his own people cannot maintain the degree of objectivity desirable, hence research experiences must be gained initially in another culture. Thus, a philosophical element enters into the research process. Interestingly enough, however, the rule that the student should not work in his own culture seems to be reversed when it comes to the foreign student, the "native" who is studying for a Ph.D. in the United States. It is an undeniable fact that most African students in American universities are Africanists who have conducted field work in their own society and are specialists in their own people. The philosophy concerning the field training of foreign students, therefore, is opposite to that which pertains to training American students. This discrepancy can only be explained in terms of the way in which the native anthropologist is seen by the field as a whole—not as a professional who will conduct research and develop theories and generalizations, but as a person who is in a position to collect information in his own culture to which an outsider does not have access. There is, then, the expectation that the insider will know things in a different, more complete way than will the outsider.

A basic aim of anthropological field research is to describe the total culture of a group of people. This description, as much as possible, should be made from the point of view of the people—i.e., the inside view. For the

anthropologist to obtain such a description, he must become actively involved in the life of the people, communicate with them, and spend a considerable period of time among them. With these general goals as the primary emphasis, it seems obvious that the trained native anthropologist can produce the best and most reliable data, since he knows the language, has grown up in the culture, and has little difficulty in becoming involved with the people.

According to Lowie, Boas encouraged the training of native anthropologists on the assumption that in describing the total way of life of a people from the point of view of the people themselves, it was the trained native who could best interpret native life from within. Materials collected by the trained native had "the immeasurable advantage of trustworthiness, authentically revealing precisely the elusive intimate thoughts and sentiments of the native, who spontaneously reveals himself in these outpourings." In the same spirit that Boas encouraged natives to become anthropologists, he also encouraged women because they could collect information on female behavior more easily than a male anthropologist. This attitude strongly implies that native and female anthropologists are seen as potential "tools" to be used to provide important information to the "real," white male anthropologists.

It is undoubtedly true that an insider may have easier access to certain types of information as compared to an outsider. But it is consistent to assume, also, that the outsider may have certain advantages in certain situations. For example, in 1969-70, I conducted a research practicum for Health students at Denver General Hospital. The students, mostly white, were sent into the black community to inquire about health practices. One student returned with the information that some women had a craving for a particular type of dirt during pregnancy. On checking further, I found this to be quite a general practice, especially in the rural South. Although I was born and grew up in the rural South, I was unaware of the practice. None of the informants volunteered this information to me, probably because it did not occur to them that I did not already know about it, since I could be readily identified as both black and Southern. The crucial point is that insiders and outsiders may be able to collect different data; they also have different points of view which may lead to different interpretations of the same set of data.

The Problem of Point of View

As an outsider, I have done research among the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona and among the Lahu, a hill tribe of Northern Thailand. As an insider, I have done research in a black community in Denver, Colorado. In this paper I wish particularly to compare my experiences in Denver and Thailand. In both places, as a researcher (whether insider or outsider), I

began with the formulation of the problem to be investigated. In Thailand the problem was to study intracultural variation among six villages of a hill tribe. In Denver the problem was to study the relationship between social structure and black self-concept. The logical processes of formulating a research problem were similar; however, the factor of point of view entered very strongly into the formulation of the Denver study, whereas it was virtually absent in the Thailand study. In Thailand, the questions relating to cultural variation were derived from the literature on the concept of culture and from the tendency of anthropologists to speak of a total population in terms of a study of one segment of that population.⁶ The goal was to determine and to measure the range of variation in cultural behavior among villages of the same tribal (cultural) group.

The problem formulation for the Denver study, on the other hand, involved much more than logic. It involved intuition, experience, and self-interest (or more properly speaking, group interest). Current literature is filled with discussions concerning black self-image, and the conclusions are that in general blacks have a more negative self-image than whites.⁷ First of all, there is some resentment over having one's own group described in this manner, although as a scientist, one must allow for the possibility that the findings are indeed correct. But as a skeptic, one can also consider the possibility that there may be something in the situation that other people are missing. For example, when I looked at my own experience of relating to other blacks within a black social context, I could not see the general conclusion of a negative self-image as being consistent with these experiences.

Before one can begin collecting data, it is necessary to gain access to the community. In this, the insider is faced with a much different set of problems than the outsider. But unless the insider returns to the same community in which he grew up, he still has the problem of developing contacts. Since I was new to the Denver area, I had to begin there (as I began in Thailand) with someone who knew someone, who in turn knew someone else in "a chain of introduction which leads at least to the threshold of his group."⁸

In the Thailand and Denver experiences, one of the biggest differences in gaining access to the community and establishing a continuing role for myself was the nature of the two social situations. In Thailand I was dealing with a small, close-knit village; but in Denver I was dealing with an urban neighborhood with little or no neighborhood-wide social organization. Once an anthropologist is accepted into a nonurban community, he takes a role for himself within the context of the community. In the urban situation, however, the researcher may have to establish a role for himself with each individual that he meets. . . .

The Lahu had seen only three types of outsiders: traders, missionaries, and government agencies of various sorts. When I first arrived in the village, there was immediate suspicion that I was a missionary since most of the Americans they had seen were missionaries. This suspicion was easily over-

come by pointing out that many of the things that I did with them, such as dancing in their "pagan" rituals, would be considered sinful by a missionary. The ghetto dweller, on the other hand, is faced with many different types of outsiders, many of whom are greeted with a great deal of hostility. Among the types of people who may knock on their door are social workers (perhaps checking up on the behavior of welfare recipients), bill collectors, salesmen, researchers, and representatives from various agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, Department of Health, local hospital, and the like. Most of these are white. Because I am black and did not wear a white shirt and tie, I was not viewed immediately as an undesirable stranger. I could just be someone looking for a friend. Thus the reaction to me was perhaps much less hostile than it would have been to a white anthropologist. Although I have no comparison of people's reaction to a white researcher, not a single person refused to be interviewed by me.⁹

This is not to say that conducting research in the black community of Denver was without problems. Sometimes people were a bit suspicious. On occasions I was suspected of being a Black Panther; alternatively, I was sometimes suspected of being connected with some of the agencies of the Establishment. Thus, the problems of establishing rapport involved similar elements in both Thailand and Denver. But convincing the few people in Denver who objected to the Panthers and thought that I might be one was much easier than convincing the Lahu that I was not a missionary. In the Denver case the problem arose when I said something about political and economic oppression. People would ask, "Are you one of those Panthers?" They always accepted my reply of "No," and got on with the interview. In Thailand, when the Lahu thought that I was a missionary, I had to demonstrate that I was not a missionary by pointing out that I participated in village activities which no missionary would ever do.

In order to collect data one has to communicate; but communication involves more than verbal exchanges. There are also facial expressions, hand movements, body movements, and tone of voice, to name just a few of the subtleties of communication. In my research experience among the Lahu of Northern Thailand there were certain mannerisms which I was able to understand only after a considerable amount of time. After about three months with the Lahu I discovered that I could tell when they were not telling me the whole truth by the way they answered questions. When I tried to collect information on a topic which people did not want to tell me about, such as religion, they would answer the question very softly; and on further checking, I would find their answers to be untrue. In most situations the good researcher reaches a point at which he is able to read meaning into the way a person says something as well as to record what is said. But where this was a level of understanding that I had to achieve as an "outsider" anthropologist, it was something that I began with as an "inside" anthropologist. That is, I have a core of common understanding with most black people: I grew up in a

poor black community; I have experienced discrimination; and I can speak and understand the "dialect."

One task which most researchers face is how to explain what they are doing. A stranger coming to a remote village in Thailand has to have a reason for being there. How does he explain his research? Since the Lahu had not seen many outsiders and knew nothing about research, the problem was solved by simply stating that I wanted to learn all that I could about their way of life. Although they could not understand why anyone wanted to know about their life, they accepted the explanation. In contrast, most people in the urban black community *do* know what research is and are familiar with some of the implications and results of research. As stated previously, various types of research have taken place in Denver. Some of the people that I interviewed had been interviewed by other researchers as well, and some researchers have appeared on local television to discuss what they have discovered about the Denver community. In addition, many people have read descriptions of black behavior and do not like what they have read. More importantly, many persons see research as a process which takes the place of political action.¹⁰ It is understandable, therefore, that explaining research in a context such as this takes on a different complexion than explaining the purpose of research to hill people in Thailand.

Negative feelings toward research are becoming more and more common among minority groups in the United States. Still, I found no single attitude towards research in the black community of Denver. Rather, I encountered three general reactions: The majority of the people I interviewed had no opinion or commitment toward research. The problem of explaining the purpose of research to this group was minor. The only real problem with them was that some felt that answering my questions would somehow harm them. There was no specific bit of information which seemed threatening—merely the task of giving answers. This was solved by not requiring names. The second general reaction was a feeling that research among black people by a black social scientist was a very good thing. This attitude was common among people who had read sociological discussions of blacks. They felt, for example, that the information contained in works such as the Moynihan report is distorted because reports written by whites cannot reflect an understanding of black people. Since people of this type felt that the record should be set straight and could only be done so by a black person, they were the most cooperative. The third reaction was the feeling that enough research has already been done, period. People with this attitude think that action is what is needed now; consequently, they were the least cooperative. However, because I am black, they did submit to an interview; but by and large, they made poor informants since they did not take the interview seriously.

One dimension of the Denver research experience which was completely absent in the Lahu experience was the very personal way in which many

people reacted to me and the research itself. I have already explained that many people with whom I talked felt that information in the currently available literature about black people is untrue, and it is untrue because it was written by whites who were unable to understand black behavior. The desire to set the record straight, therefore, was very strong, as evidenced in one of my first encounters with a woman living in the housing project. After explaining the nature of my research project, she replied, "Finally!" And there were other ways in which people reacted to me in a very personal manner; I was, to many of them, not a social scientist but a black man who had overcome the barriers of American society and made good.

Data Analysis and Publication

A common problem confronting anthropologists when compiling their data is whether or not to withhold certain information from publication. Many who have done research in the Third World countries have withheld from their reports information which they thought would displease or embarrass the host country and jeopardize their chances of returning. As an inside researcher, I felt this emotion even more keenly than I did as an outsider. As an outsider, you work with people who, because of cultural, racial, or language differences, are always aware that you are an outsider. As an insider, people often do not look upon you as a researcher. You may be a friend, someone who is trusted.¹¹ In this capacity, people have revealed deeply personal things to me; and in this context also, I am in a position to learn many specific things about the people. Such revelations may be related to the research, but I would be both dishonest and disloyal to reveal such information.

Because of my emotional involvement, I am also inclined to question certain conclusions which have been reached concerning the behavior of black people, such as the conclusion that blacks have a negative self-image, or that Africans were easily enslaved compared to the New World Indians whose nobility led them to prefer death to slavery. It might not occur to an outsider to question this theory about slavery because these conclusions do not involve his own identity. For example, in a conversation at one time with a white historian, it was apparent that he had never considered the high rate of suicide or the high death rate in general among the early African population as an indication of resistance to slavery.

The fact that I may question many existing ideas about black people with which the white anthropologist might not be concerned is not in itself an argument for the advantages of either the inside or outside view.

To observe a way of life best, it seems, involves living that way of life. This assumption invites two criticisms, each of which has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. First, is "the inside" a privileged observation point? There is

nothing especially privileged about the observations of a parade made by those in it. Spectators may be in a better position, television viewers in a still better one. Which vantage point you choose must surely be a matter of what you want to observe and why.¹²

One vantage point cannot be said to be better than the other. There are logical dangers inherent in both approaches. The outsider may enter the social situation armed with a battery of assumptions which he does not question and which guide him to certain types of conclusions; and the insider may depend too much on his own background, his own sentiments, his desires for what is good for his people. The insider, therefore, may distort the "truth" as much as the outsider. Since both positions involve the possibility of "distortion," which is better? . . .

Many anthropologists feel that the native's view of his own culture reflects the most accurate view. The aim of anthropological research, we are often told, is to see things from the point of view of the native. Although the inside view is loudly proclaimed by anthropologists, few go so far as to consider the belief in magic and witchcraft as an element of absolute truth. There is no escape from the idea that outsiders and insiders view social reality from different points of view and that no matter how hard each tries, neither can completely discard his preconceptions of what that social reality is or should be. From this point of view, neither is any more or less trustworthy than the other. Both have room for distortions, inaccuracies, half-truths. A social anthropologist who claims to have acquired a complete understanding of another culture stands self-condemned.¹³ A lesson that most anthropologists have failed to learn is that a subsequent researcher will always find errors in one's data, no matter how many years one remains in the field, no matter how well one speaks the language, and no matter how far one thinks he has got under the skin of the native.

Since both the inside researcher and the outside researcher face the same empirical problems, is there any advantage to the native anthropologist at all? My answer is yes, potentially. The problem at this point is that there are native anthropologists, but there is no native anthropology. By this I mean there is little theory in anthropology which has been formulated from the point of view of tribal, peasant, or minority peoples. Thus, the whole value of the inside researcher is not that his data or insights into the social situation are better—but that they are *different*. Most of the few black anthropologists operating in this country are looking for something new, questioning old assumptions about social processes, developing new ones, exploding old myths, and in the process developing new ones. The work of the white anthropologist among non-Western people is not bad because he is white, but because the field of anthropology as a whole was dull and uncreative in the 1960's. Our concepts and theories, our way of looking at people have lost their relevance.¹⁴

Lehman, in an article on the problem of minority relations in Burma, concludes that social science theory has played a major role in generating the problem of majority/minority relations in Burma or "at least [has played a part] in obscuring the conditions required for their solution."¹⁵ This is no less true of the situation in the United States. The theory to which Lehman refers is the consensus model of society which is the basis of much anthropological thinking about social problems.

In anthropology the conception of a primitive society has been one in which there is structure, function, and equilibrium. Consensus on values is the basic element which holds a society together. This means that the society operates without conflict, competition, or resentment. Everyone agrees upon the values, internalizes those values, and voluntarily follows the proper forms of behavior. Force is seldom needed to get this conformity. Everyone in the society does exactly as he is supposed to do at all times. This basic assumption about society leads to a description of the caste system of India as

... an organic system with each particular caste and subcaste filling a distinctive functional role. It is a system of labor division from which the element of competition among workers has been largely excluded.¹⁶

Thus, the elements of oppression, frustration, resentment, aspirations, and hostility are not seen in most anthropological descriptions of social organization. The lower castes never rebel against the higher, nor do they resent their position in the system.

There is an alternative to the notion of primitive societies being held together by value consensus. Dahrendorf has written:

From the point of view of coercion theory, ... it is not voluntary cooperation or general consensus but enforced constraint that makes social organizations cohere.) In institutional terms, this means that in every social organization some positions are entrusted with a right to exercise control over other positions in order to ensure effective coercion: it means, in other words, that there is a differential distribution of authority. ... this differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflict of a type that is germane to class conflict in the traditional (Marxian) sense of the term.¹⁷

Another important dimension to this problem involves the extremely high regard with which anthropologists tend to hold the traditions of other people. Sometimes anthropologists seem more attached to traditional behavioral patterns of a group than the people themselves, though as Maquet notes:

I do not mean that anthropological writings, by enhancing African traditional values, have had a significant bearing on the upholding of the colonial system. ... What matters is that anthropology was oriented as though it wanted to preserve the existing situation.¹⁸

Robert Redfield also recognized this in his *Peasant Society and Culture*.¹⁹ He wondered whether differences reported about peasant values might be due to choices made by observers and writers as to which aspects of the social situation they chose to stress. He asserted that the observer of a people's values must answer such questions as "What do these people desire for themselves and for their children? To what kind of life do they attach highest esteem?" Many anthropologists never ask these questions. They assume that peasants find rural life to be just as romantic as they do. Lopreato, who did deal with this subject, found that the Italian peasant had an intense dislike of his life-situation and a strong desire to leave the inferno of his peasant community. It is unlikely, he writes, that the Italian peasant represents a special case.²⁰ Indeed, the concept of a culture of poverty deemphasizes the fact that poverty groups are concerned with their marginal economic position and have a strong desire for something better. This is one of the strongest elements which has come through in the interviews I have had with poor people.

It should be clear from the above that the native anthropologist should be one who looks at social phenomena from a point of view different from that of the traditional anthropologist. I feel that this point of view should be admittedly biased, in favor of the insider's own social group. Thus, when I seek to "set the record straight" about some of the things which have been written about black people, this is not only justified but necessary. It is unfortunate that Third World students who are trained in American universities have, in the past, been *unable* to do this. This came about because the process of training itself eroded what could have been a distinctive native point of view. But this is rapidly changing. The students that are now being trained are becoming aware of the biases in social science and are not bound by the old values of objectivity and neutrality. This change in mood may disturb many people. But if anthropology is to survive it must respond to the changing social and technological realities of the present. It is well known that part of the process of colonization involves the distortion of social, cultural, and historical facts about a colonized people. The emergence of a native anthropology is part of an essential decolonization of anthropological knowledge and requires drastic changes in the recruitment and training of anthropologists.

Notes and References

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3. Allan R. Holmberg, "The Research and Development Approach to the Study of Change," *Human Organization*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1958, p. 12.
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8. B. D. Paul, "Interview Techniques and Field Relationships," in A. L. Kroeber (ed.), *Anthropology Today*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1953, p. 430.
9. There does not seem to be complete agreement on whether the race of the interviewer is an important element of bias in the interview situation. Williams concludes that the race of the interviewer "is an important variable related to bias but . . . this is only under certain conditions with certain types of interview questions." Weller and Luchterhand, on the other hand, write: ". . . our findings indicate that . . . Negro respondents gave higher quality responses to white interviewers than to Negro interviewers in a personally sensitive research area." J. Allen Williams, Jr., "Interviewer-Respondent Interaction: A Study of Bias in the Information Interview," *Sociometry*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 1964, pp. 338-352; Leonard Weller and Elmer Luchterhand, "Interviewer-Respondent Interaction in Negro and White Family Life Research," *Human Organization*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1968, pp. 50-55.
10. See, for example, Robert K. Merton and Daniel Lerner, "Social Scientists and Research Policy," in Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (eds.), *The Policy Sciences*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1951, p. 299.
11. Cf. I. C. Jarvie, "The Problem of Ethical Integrity in Participant Observation," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 10, No. 5, 1969, p. 505, who observes that the complete participant observer conceals his character as observer. There is the problem of striking a balance between being a "good friend" and a "snooping stranger." On the one hand is the aim of participating fully, or identifying entirely with the alien way of life; on the other is the danger of betraying "trust."
12. Jarvie, *op. cit.*, p. 506.
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