

Field Report: An Academic Workshop

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Editor's Note

This field report expresses perfectly the kind of confusion almost all of us experience when entering the field. How do we know whether what we're doing is "right" or not? What in particular should we record when we don't have time to write down everything among all the myriad impressions thrusting themselves upon us in a new environment? What is this strange language that people in other walks of life take for granted, but which seems so alien to us as outsiders? And how on earth are we to interpret people's contradictory remarks? This report will warn novices of what's in store for them, as well as remind experienced fieldworkers of what they've been through. I'm sure it will also provide food for thought and the occasional chuckle!

As a doctoral student interested in anthropological methods and ethnographic writing, but as a non-anthropologist and a non-business professional, I am attending a PhD course at the Copenhagen Business School on something called "The business of ethnography". I have chosen to take part in the course because I wish to learn about ethnography: what it is, what it does, what can be done with it, and, most of all, how to do it.

Together with my fellow students, I feel as if I've been thrown in

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at the deep end right from the outset. After the first day of the course, and with just a vague idea forming in my head about what this business of ethnography is, we're being asked to practice it: ethnographic fieldwork is learning by doing, I guess. Part of the course, then, consists of a small-scale fieldwork exercise, with two days of observing a group of anthropologists participating in a workshop on *The Business of Ethnography and the Ethnography of Business*. I have only heard about a few of the participants and did not receive the workshop program beforehand, so I feel a bit apprehensive as the first day of the workshop begins. Am I going to get the right information down in my notebook? Will I be good at observing? How do you actually know if you are good at observing? What is it that I am to look for? Should I even be looking for anything? How does this ethnographic fieldwork stuff even work?

To an anthropologist these questions may seem rather simple, but for a newcomer to the staged field that this workshop constitutes, it is a whole different thing. At least I have a little black notebook – that seems to be one of the tools of the trade for anthropologists. I feel a bit at a loss, hopeful I will learn something, but nevertheless very confused as to how to go about this task. These questions and feelings run through me as I take up my seat at the observer table along one side of the room. I'm trying to look the part of someone who knows what she's doing.

Even though the set-up seems odd, it is quite obvious from our positions who the anthropologists are and who the students are. I am sitting towards one end of a long table with seven fellow students. We are all facing 'the action' taking place at a big table opposite us where the workshop participants have taken up their seats. Some are facing us; some have their backs to us. Another group of student observers is placed on chairs against the back wall on my left, not behind a table but sitting right behind some workshop participants who have taken up their seats at one end of the big table. On the right wall opposite them, to my right, is a white screen, and hanging from the ceiling over the big table in the already warm room a projector hums rather loudly. We are eleven students altogether. As observers, therefore, we outnumber the ten workshop participants. The oddness of this situation is palpable, since the division between those observing and those being observed is quite distinct, both in our relative numbers and in the fact that we are not seated at the big table but along the sides of the room, looking at – and more or less surrounding – the workshop participants. Indeed, one of the workshop participants comments on the set-up and the presence of us students as everyone settles into their seats by saying "It's very uncomfortable being studied". I am not sure if there isn't a hint of truthfulness to his remark, although he smiles and laughs a little while he gets seated. Regardless of whether or not he means it, the slightly uncomfortable feeling is on both sides of the room it seems – I least I feel a bit uncomfortable with the task and the situation.

As the workshop begins, I start wondering how I should take notes. The first presenter starts her PowerPoint presentation after a short welcome speech by one of the organizers. As she begins presenting, I find myself going back and forth between being sucked into what she is saying and wanting to take notes on the contents because I find them academically interesting; and then, at the same time, wanting to take notes on the atmosphere, the reactions of the other participants, and my own feelings about the whole situation. Looking at my notes now afterwards it seems as if I have been jotting down a little bit of everything.

As the presenter continues, I find that it is hard to wrap my head around all this academic discourse, which seems to be taking place in a totally new language. I have been to academic workshops before, and it seems to me that these things all have similar formats. First, someone (usually the organizer) says something to welcome the participants and then briefly introduces the first person who is to present (usually according to the programme which has been distributed to all participants before the workshop). Then, the first presenter takes the stage to make a presentation. At a business school, this very often involves PowerPoint presentations. As to what happens next, it seems there is some discrepancy. Either there is a new presenter right away or there is a brief discussion session. As far as my experience goes in terms of the previous workshops I have attended, there is always room for a couple of questions after the first presentation. Things proceed according to a Goffmanesque 'staging'.

So far, this workshop seems to follow what I have previously experienced as the 'normal' format of a workshop. Nevertheless, in this one, the lingo is quite different. I keep getting the feeling that, by using certain words, the anthropologist presenting seems to be speaking in some kind of code. She is using normal words and phrases, but it seems that here they mean something slightly different from what I am used to. The participants, however, seem to get it, so I write down "anthropological jargon" beside a quote I jotted down when the presenter talked about anthropology "in", "of", "for" etc. It seems that all these little prepositions are very important in the language of anthropologists. As an observer, I realize that I am not part of the target audience of this workshop and thus understanding the lingo may be one of the major obstacles to finding out what is actually going on. During her presentation, the presenter remarks: "so anthropologists work in the sociological field – it's sad, but that's the way it is". I write this down in my notebook, but haven't taken note of this quote until now when I come across it again after having read Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field*. In this book, Van Maanen talks about distinctions between sociology and anthropology, and how these disciplines have used fieldwork in different ways. Furthermore, he talks about how sociologists, over time, haven't given fieldwork the same status as it has achieved in anthropology. I

wonder why the presenter thinks it is sad that anthropologists work in the sociological field. I guess I still have a lot to learn about anthropologists and anthropology.

After the first day of the workshop has finished, we have the opportunity to go out to dinner with the anthropologists. In the terminology of the day – something one of the organizers of the workshop and course introduced already during the morning session – “the children” get to go out to dinner with the “grown-ups”. I guess it is just another comment on the weirdness of the set-up during the day, but also a way to clearly distinguish non-anthropologists from the anthropologists. At the restaurant we are deliberately mixed up in the seating arrangements. The main organizer makes sure that more or less equal numbers of “children” and “grown-ups” are distributed at the tables. The observation exercise continues. The “grown-up” sitting next to me asks whether our assignment is also continuing during the evening. I have to tell him that, yes, we’ve been encouraged by one of the organizers to continue with the assignment during dinner.

I am not sure what “my grown-up” thinks about that. We embark on a conversation about Denmark and the Danes, and I feel a bit uncomfortable as he seems to be much better at getting me to talk, than the other way around. I end up saying things about myself that I would never under normal circumstances share with a stranger, let alone with someone whom I’m supposed to be observing. How did I end up talking about visiting my boyfriend’s family in Jutland? I mean, I’m supposed to get *him* to say something, right? Get him talking about the workshop today and about being an anthropologist, so that I have a chance to get to understand some more of the lingo. I have a vague idea that I’m supposed to be distancing myself a little from my informant, but have no idea how to achieve this in practice.

Before I get completely frustrated with my own conversation skills, one of us (was it me, or him, who got us on that track?) manages to turn the conversation to informants. We discuss the notion of “becoming” your informant, or becoming like your informants, and the role of the anthropologist in the field. I talk to him about my going to China to do my fieldwork and never having done proper fieldwork before – at least not in the way the workshop participants have been talking about fieldwork today, when they said you need about a minimum of six months in the field.

When it comes to the relationship between field worker and informants, my interlocutor anthropologist says to me: “In my fieldwork I never became them – that just never happened, like, I just didn’t”. I didn’t think much of this remark until a few minutes later when he leans over the table to ask the man sitting on my other side –one of the workshop organizers – “Did you become Japanese when you were in Japan?” To

which the organizer answers: “Yes, very much so”. And here, surprisingly (at least to me) my interlocutor says: “Crossing the line – well, we all do, don’t we? Become like them we study.”

I am puzzled. Didn’t he just say the opposite to what he told me a few minutes earlier? Didn’t he just say that he never became one of them? I can’t work out how this makes sense. But it strikes me that perhaps who you talk to, what you say, and how you say it, are more important. When he was talking to me, I felt it was OK never to become like, or just become, your informants. But when he leaned over and said the complete opposite to the man next to me, I felt excluded again. A feeling returns that I have had all day during the workshop and now all the way through the dinner: a constant, small, nagging feeling telling me that this is somehow all staged, and that we students are deliberately being kept in the dark about what is actually going on. And as time wears on during dinner, I more and more get the feeling that understanding these people, these anthropologists, is going to take a whole lot of fieldwork and reading the literature of their profession. Maybe it’ll even require an education in anthropology, if I am to become one of them or have a chance of understanding their jargon, their constant little play on words of the trade, their in-jokes and esoteric hints at a knowledge and language which to me seems alien. This, despite the fact that to me they are academics; I mean, I normally hang around academics; my whole family consists of academics – but not this kind. That much becomes more and more obvious to me. Anthropologists, at least the kind I have encountered during the first workshop day and dinner, seem to me to be a special breed of academics.

The next day, I discover that some anthropologists don’t follow the format of a “normal” presentation. Both during the morning session and during the last workshop session after lunch, I notice that reading out aloud from a manuscript seems to be quite normal among anthropologists. In the academic environment I come from it is usually a no-go to read out aloud from a written text, since this is considered a sign of insecurity or an inability to perform or engage with your audience. One of the most respected people in the room – at least as far as the first day of observation has led me to believe – for a large part of his presentation in the morning session reads out aloud from his paper. At this point, I figure out that this particular person reading out aloud is cool – especially since one of the other participants remarked to me on the first day at lunch that “he is one of the most well-known and well-respected people here” and continued: “I mean, he’s brilliant”. And everyone, without exception, knows who he is – even me. Basically, I am thinking this guy can get away with going about his presentation in any way he likes.

But then in the afternoon session it becomes clear to me that anthropologists perhaps have a special way of presenting. As a soon-to-defend-his-PhD-thesis anthropologist presents his paper, he keeps his

seat (rather than stands up like many other participants) and reads aloud during large parts of his presentation. At this point I think I'm getting the point that for anthropologists it is important to get words right; to be precise about the descriptions of the "natives" they've been studying. This is perhaps especially the case when presenting to other anthropologists. This makes me think that I finally understand a remark by one of yesterday's presenters which had puzzled me. He had prepared a PowerPoint but ended up not using it, saying before he even started: "I'm not sure if I should do a paper or do my presentation". I never really got what "doing a paper" meant and what the distinction was. This kept nagging me until the second day when it dawns on me that "doing a paper" may be about reading out aloud from a written paper – perhaps a text participants have received in advance. This presenter ended up doing some of his presentation by talking directly to the participants without many notes, and the rest by sitting down and reading his manuscript aloud. So, if anything can be gathered from these observations, it seems that at least some of the anthropologists I am observing like words, and like being precise about them. Also, there may be a general acceptance of this form of communication although it has turned out to be quite a surprise to me.

From just two days of observing anthropologists at a workshop talking about anthropology and business, I'm not sure I am confident about concluding anything much about anthropological workshops or, for that matter, anthropologists – other than perhaps, for me as an academic and a doctoral student, that these two days have only made me interested in being part of their world and in trying to understand these types of academics and their work. I have, however, realized by now that becoming them – or even like them – may never be within my reach unless I get educated in the way they are educated, read what they read, and (very importantly) do lots and lots of fieldwork.

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