FIELDWORK IN PRACTICE

Dr. Rapti Siriwardane-de Zoysa (Leibniz Center for Tropical Marine Research)

BLUEURBAN
Towards Blue Urbanism for Sea Level Change Adaptation: Global Trajectories and Speculative Futuring in Island Southeast Asia

A German Science Foundation (DFG) funded SPP initiative “Regional Sea Level Change and Society” (Phase II)
Icebreaker
What is research to you?

Epistemology?
Critical debates

Research itself described as a **world-making** process:

- **Postivistic paradigms: (re)searching, discovery, refining...**
- **An act of reinterpretation, an act of debunking, sociological research as a “combat art”** (Bourdieu) -
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9PCp9oKPRw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9PCp9oKPRw)

- **A colonizing construct?** (…”they came, they saw, they named, they claimed...research is one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), e.g. “data plantations”
“Research is a formalized curiosity. It is poking in prying with a purpose”

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)
From Dust Tracks on the Road: An Autobiography
Ethnographic Research

- Ethnographic fieldwork was developed originally by anthropologists to study a society, culture, or group in depth.
- The approach depended heavily on observation and in some cases integration into the society.
- Participant observation enables researchers to share the experience of their subjects.
Critiquing The “Exotic Other”

“Anthropologists! Anthropologists!”
Critiquing “Parachute Science”


Video link: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982221000622
Immersive Fieldwork – “Being there...”

- Diversity (quantitative and qualitative)
- Bearing witness/observational, critical creative, reflexive
- Interpretative – challenging the ‘taken for-granted’
- Thick description (Geertz, participant-observation, emersion) – “everything counts”
- ‘Etic’ versus ‘emic’ perspectives
- “Recalcitrant data” – research not a form of disembodied “nut-gathering” (Whatmore, 2006)
- Reflexive practice: positionality, power & situated ethics
Problematizing the mystique of ‘fieldwork’
Imaginaries of the ‘field’
Demystifying the ‘field’ – old conceptions

Conventionally what is the “field” in fieldwork been taken to mean?
- The act of getting there/arriving (a situated place)
- A socially bounded place (e.g. a village, particular identities etc.)
- A ‘field’ of relations and encounters- clear entry points, ways of being, people who allow access (gate-keepers)
- A place of legitimate interpretation, knowledge gathering (e.g. rite of passage?)
- A place that could be left behind? (rules and rituals of exit)

BUT these dualisms offer more questions and dilemmas ....
Some questions for reflection

• Where does the “field” begin and end? (migratory routes, diaspora networks...)

• As researchers can we think of “insiders” and “outsiders” experience (the death of the ‘native’)

• Even if “emic” – what do you put in and leave out (the power of the authorial voice is highly edited)

• Where does the notion of “work” sit during fieldwork?

Conducting a health screening at a local secondary school (Backe, 2015), link: https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2015/07/24/playing-along-fieldwork-emotional-labor-and-self-care/S
Stop the Dump Fires’ group in the Arctic community in Nunavut. It features a pregnant Inuk woman and activist, and was taken during a four month long dump fire that occurred during the summer of 2014. During the fire, pregnant women and women of childbearing age were warned not to go outside due to risks caused by dioxins. The Inuktitut syllabics written on her hand read ‘Taima’ or ‘enough’, referring to the decades of government underfunding that contributed to this and many other dump fires.

- Uncovering painful and sensitive info (e.g. people, places, animals that might be contaminated) bear very real material consequences...so how do we proceed if we say we’re doing action research?

- ETHNOGRAPHIC REFUSAL — as a practice in which researchers and participants together decide what kinds of information to withhold and make available for use within the academic and policy community. Purpose — “not to bury info, but to ensure that communities are able to respond to these issues on their own terms. Intended to redirect academic analysis away from harmful pain-based narratives that obscure slow violence, towards structures and institutions that engender those narratives.”
LIFEWORLDS: WHOSE REALITIES, WHAT STORIES?

BLUEURBAN
Towards Blue Urbanism for Sea Level Change Adaptation: Global Trajectories and Speculative Futuring in Island Southeast Asia

A German Science Foundation (DFG) funded SPP initiative “Regional Sea Level Change and Society” (Phase II)
The interconnectedness of meaning, motives and action as basis for the meaningful construction of the social world.

The 'Lifeworld'

"province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense"  
(Schütz/Luckmann, 1974: 3)

“[A]n adequate understanding of the ‘reality sui generis’ of society requires an inquiry into the manner in which this reality is constructed.”

(Berger/Luckmann 1966: 17)

Processes of Construction:

- Externalization: idea, interpretation of reality, repeatedly told
- Objectivation: idea is re-told – becomes an ‘object of consciousness’ for people, has developed a factual existence/ truth – it becomes ‘real’
- Internalisation: future generations are born into a world where this idea has become part of the common understanding of the world
“In the depths of the ocean, there are fascinating creatures”
• Ocean as resource provider
• Ocean as transport surface
• Ocean as battleground
• Ocean as.....

Can you think of others?
“Anything goes?” On rigour and methodological vigilance?

“Rigorous Approximation” - Applies to the interpretive social sciences (Olivier de Sardan, 2015) – plausibility, never the truth

1) **Rigour of argument** (convincing)
2) **Rigour of logic** (making sense of contradictions....)
3) **Rigour of theory** (statements that sit within a framework of scholarly debates)
4) **Empirical rigour** (to ‘reference reality’) – a double leap:
   - ‘data’ + arguments
   - ‘data’ + reference reality

24.11.2010

https://comicnurse.com/pulp-culture/
Emic perspectives and Grounded Theory/ Epistemology

Emic – actors’ point of view

“The term grounded theory has the advantage of connecting rather opposition fieldwork and theory. ..highlights the production of theory based on data [insights] from their field” Olivier de Sardar (2015: 11)

Traps:

Sweeping generalisations vs. Overinterpretation?

..... Can you think of others?
Lunch break
Icebreaker
The ‘Ethnographic Pact’

What is an ethnographic statement?

Not a representation of reference reality nor reflection but “production”, “performance” and “hypothesis”

“Other people’s reality exist independently” of the researcher (OdS, pp. 14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field inquiry</th>
<th>Inquiry through questionnaires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>broad, multidimensional, noncodable information</td>
<td>circumscribed, univocal, codable information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artisanal processing</td>
<td>statistical processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>natural situations or situations close to natural situations (conversation)</td>
<td>artificial situations (interrogation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>researcher in person</td>
<td>paid investigators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immersion in the milieu</td>
<td>sporadic interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information on contextualized processes and logics (without statistical</td>
<td>information on decontextualized variables (statistical representativeness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>representativeness)</td>
<td>extensive, brevity, linearity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intensive, duration, returns</td>
<td>verifiable, precise hypotheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research trails, iteration, improvisation</td>
<td>dependent/independent variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many intertwined variables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Fieldwork above all is a matter of know-how; it uses intuition, improvisation and tinkering (bricolage)” (Oliver de Sardan, 2015: 24)

“Learning to be a field researcher poses the same problems as learning to live in society” (Hughes, 1996: 279)
Weekend exercise – ‘Warung watching’

- How do make something you intimately know ‘unfamiliar’

- Once you have ‘seen’ something, are there way to look at a social space differently?

Spend 15-20 minutes in a warung or any other eatery close to your home. Simply observe (and interact if you wish). Try documenting everything you think is of ‘significance’.

How is your warung space organised? What are the social roles you observe? What do you see as ‘event-ful?’, interesting, unfamiliar, maybe odd or unusual?

You could choose to take photographs and record sounds if you wish!
Thank you!